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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the story of education pioneer Sarah Winnemucca (1844-1891), a self-educated Northern Paiute Indian who spent her life trying to improve the living conditions and education of the Paiutes. Most of what is known about Sarah comes from her autobiography, "Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims," first printed privately in 1883. Sarah's life experiences are viewed in historical context. She started a school for Paiute Indian children after meeting with two socially prominent Bostonians who supported her endeavors, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann. When it was established, Sarah's Peabody Indian School was a school taught by and for Indians. Children were not separated from their Indian life and languages as they were when they attended government schools. There were many struggles while trying to raise enough money to keep the school going with Sarah's particular educational vision. She was never able to get government funds and had to close the school in 1888. (Contains 32 notes and 9 references.) (BT)

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Sarah Winnemucca and her school

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Sarah Winnemucca (1844-1891)

The Indians survived our open intention of wiping them out, and since the tide turned they have even weathered our good intentions toward them, which can be much more deadly.

John Steinbeck
America and Americans

Historical Context

Sarah Winnemucca was a self educated Northern Paiute[1] Indian. The Northern Paiutes are a desert-plateau people. Their homeland included the western part of present-day Nevada, southeast Oregon, and northeast California. They lived around Pyramid Lake and the Truckee River, and around Humboldt Lake and the Humboldt River. The available water made life easier and food sources were more abundant. They lived in small bands of relatives of ten to forty families. The Paiutes were rather short in stature, heavy set, lighter in complexion than other Indians were and more eager to learn. They led a nomadic life, following seasonal food trails. The Paiutes harvested seeds and nuts of pines along sacred trails. They built new lodgings, the "wickiups," season after season leaving their old lodges and debris untouched. This led the white men to

[1] "Paiutes" or "Piutes" is used interchangeably. The name means "water" or "true."

overestimate their numbers.[2] Sarah was the daughter and granddaughter of leaders of the Winnemucca band. After the death of her father, Winnemucca II, she became the leader of the Paiutes. Her grandfather, Winnemucca I, was one of the first Paiutes to have contact with white men. After a peaceful meeting (1844) with Captain John C. Fremont, he became friends with him, and encouraged others to be friends with the "white brothers." It was Fremont who named him Captain Truckee, and also called the river the same name. Later that year, Captain Truckee and about a dozen Paiute men led Fremont and his party to California, and fought the Mexicans with him. Among the gifts Fremont gave Truckee was a letter which Truckee called "my rag friend." It guaranteed him good will with all white men.[3] When Truckee died, the "white rag friend" was buried with him.[4]

According to the Paiute creation myth, told by Sarah's grandfather, Captain Truckee, in the beginning there was only one family in the world. One girl and one boy were dark and the others were white. Because the children fought with each other and that grieved their parents, the father told the white children to go away. The dark children grew into a large nation and the Paiutes believed they belonged to it. They also believed that the nation, which grew from the white children, would some day send some representative to meet them and heal the old trouble. When Captain Truckee saw

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[2] George F. Brimlow, "The Life of Sarah Winnemucca: The Formative Years," *Oregon Historical Society, vol.* 53 (June, 1952), 103.
[3] Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims,* edited by Mrs. Horace Mann (printed privately, Boston and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1883; reprint, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994), 9-10.
[4] Ibid., 69.

the first white explorers go through his territory he believed that they were his long lost brothers.[5]

The white man's ways and material goods impressed Captain Truckee. He chose to be friends with the white men throughout his life, even when he was rejected by some of them. He instilled his belief to his own band and to Sarah, who also adopted this attitude and continued it throughout her life.

Sarah's life and education

Most of what we know about Sarah's life and her activities comes from her autobiography, *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims,* which she wrote in English. Sarah was born about 1844, into the Northern Paiute tribe. Her Paiute name was Thocmetony, which means "Shell-Flower." She was the second daughter and fourth of nine children of Winnemucca II, the Paiute chief.

Sarah spent her short life trying to improve the living conditions and the education of the Paiutes. She founded a private school for Indian children; she worked tirelessly to remedy the injustices to her people, and advocated coexistence with the white settlers. Through these efforts Sarah met many influential persons including Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Mann who adopted and advanced her cause. In pursuing these activities she confronted Indian agents, local politicians, and the U.S. government who tried to discredit her.

In 1850, Captain Truckee took a number of his people, including Sarah and her family, to work on a ranch in the San

[5] Ibid., 6-7.

Joaquin Valley. Sarah began to learn Spanish and English while there.

In 1857, Sarah and her sister Elma went to live for about a year in the home of Major William M. Ormsby as his daughter's companions. Major Ormsby was an agent for the stagecoach stop for the Carson Valley Express in Genoa, Nevada. Sarah had a gift for languages. Her English improved rapidly. She learned to read, write and sing. She also learned Spanish. While with the Ormsby family, she assumed the name Sarah and became a nominal Christian without losing her primitive beliefs, which centered on a "Spirit Father."[6]

At her grandfather's dying request, in 1860, Sarah and her sister Elma were sent to school at St. Mary's Convent in San Jose, California. Her formal education ended abruptly after three weeks. Wealthy parents objected to the presence of an Indian child, forcing the nuns to send her home.[7]

To support herself, Sarah did housework off and on for white families in Virginia City. She spent her hard-earned money to buy books to further her education.

After the discovery of gold and silver in the Sierra, in the 1860s, the Paiutes found themselves in the path of white progress. The white emigrants settled on Indian homelands. This led to a series of clashes with the emigrants, i.e. the Paiute War of 1860, which brought an end to the establishment of a Paiute reservation at Pyramid Lake, north of the town of Reno. From then on the grief

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[6] Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes*, 58-64.
[7] Ibid., 67, 70.

started for the Paiutes at the hands of corrupt Indian agents. The agents, at best, did nothing to help the Paiutes adjust to the white man's ways and, at worst, exploited them, leaving them starving and destitute.

Early Indian policy had allowed politicians to select Indian agents. They were to safe-guard the welfare of the Indians, but few did their job well, and some even stole the provisions and clothing the government issued. Many agents, isolated in their posts, worked for personal gains. Contractors provided inferior goods at prices for best quality, with the agent sharing in the gains of the contracts.[8] This behavior of the agents had its beginning with the fur-traders and it was referred to as the "Indian Ring."[9] Reform was badly needed.

In March 1869, President Grant withdrew the appointment of civil agents and placed army officers in charge that served only until July of 1870. In 1869, President Grant by authority of the Congress named a board of Indian commissioners. It consisted of philanthropic men who served without compensation. The board supervised jointly with the Secretary of the Interior, appropriations made for the Indian service.

To provide education, culture and religion for the Indians, these boards were asked to name the agents. They were to appoint employees of Christian character. Salaries for the agents, doctors,

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[8] Brimlow, "The Life of Sarah Winnemucca,"125.
[9] Elizabeth P. Peabody, *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical Solution to the Indian Problem* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1886), 27.

teachers, millers, blacksmith, farmers and others ranged from $600 to $1500 annually. [10]

In 1865, worse trouble erupted when the Paiutes were accused for stealing some white men's cattle. In retaliation, soldiers from a nearby army post marched against the Paiutes' camp and killed women, children, and old men, setting fire to the reed huts while the Paiute warriors were off on a hunt. It was even said that the soldiers had hurled small children into the flames. "I had one baby brother killed there," Sarah wrote later.[11]

In 1866, after the loss of her mother and sister, Sarah went to live with her brother Natchez on Pyramid Lake. She stayed through the winter where she had "nothing to eat half of the time." The local agent sold to the Paiutes the government's free food that he was to distribute to them and did not supply for the ordinary needs of his wards. [12] The Indians, at that time, were neither aliens nor citizens, but wards of the United States.

It was during this time, Sarah, at twenty years of age begun to study the plight of the Paiutes. She had seen infants die and men and women suffer from starvation. She was determined to publicize these wrongs, hoping that the Paiutes' story might move some citizens to action. Sarah gave lectures (1879), wrote letters to the commanders of the army forts, local newspapers, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Of course all these activities made the agents angry. They tried to discredit her by false affidavits where she was

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[10] Brimlow, "The Life of Sarah Winnemucca,"125.
[11] Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes,* 78.
[12] Ibid., 79.

presented as a frontier dance-hall girl. Sarah and her supporters countered these accusations by responding immediately.

Sarah was not the only one concerned with agent abuses in their dealings with the Indians. Jackson in *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with some of the Indian Tribes*, exposes the plight of many Indian tribes.

Without resources, many of the Paiutes, instead of fighting, flocked to military forts for the rations that the army issued them.

Sarah served for several years (c. 1868-71) as post interpreter at Camp McDermit in northeastern Nevada. In 1871, she married First Lieutenant Edward C. Bartlett in spite of the prohibition of marriages between Indians and whites. Sarah left him within a year because of his intemperance. [13]

In 1872, the Paiutes were sent to the Malheur Reservation in southeastern Oregon, with Samuel Parrish as the Indian agent. He was the best agent Sarah had encountered. She became Parrish's interpreter in 1875 and assisted at the agency school taught by Mrs. Parrish.[14]

In June 1878, when the Bannock War broke out Sarah offered her services to the army, helped to free her father and a number of his followers, and brought the troops much needed information. She then served as General Oliver O. Howard's guide, scout, and

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[13] Gae Whitney Canfield, *Sarah Winnemucca* of *the Northern Paiutes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 65-67.

[14] For details on the Malheur Reservation see Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes,* chapter 6. Parrish was the only agent out of 17 that had been sent to the Paiutes who was decent to them.

interpreter during the campaign. Later, General Howard gave Sarah a letter of introduction to use when she visited the East Coast.

In 1879, after the Bannock War, Sarah gave a series of lectures in San Francisco, to standing room only. Local and regional newspapers covered the lectures. She implored the audiences to help the Paiutes get teachers and books, to be educated. She also asked for homes for the Paiutes. The recognition Sarah received in San Francisco was noticed in Washington, D. C. An agent from the Interior Department, J. M. Haworth was waiting for her upon her return in Lovelock, Nevada. The Paiute leaders met with Haworth. Sarah acted as the interpreter. They told him that they were tired of the government promises and begging for bread for their children. Haworth promised to make arrangements for them to go to Washington. Sarah felt hopeful.

In January 1880, Sarah, her father, and brother Natchez went to Washington, D. C. at government expense. Upon arrival Sarah discovered that she and the Paiute delegation were confined by a strict schedule. It allowed them only appearances before government officials and a lot of sightseeing. Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz also forbade Sarah to lecture while in Washington. She pleaded the Paiutes cause with Secretary Schurz and President Rutherford B. Hayes. Schurz gave Sarah a letter, dated July 20, 1880, authorizing the Paiutes' return to the Malheur Reservation, where they were promised individual allotments of land.

Sarah was not aware that Rinehart, the last agent at Malheur, had started a campaign against her. He had sent affidavits to Washington, from white settlers discrediting Sarah.

In spite of Secretary Schurz's letter to Sarah and his promise for land, none of the Paiutes received the "land in severalty" at the Malheur reservation, which had been allowed to revert to the public domain, seemingly for the benefit of white stock-growers. Sarah was devastated. [15]

Sarah next went to Vancouver (Washington) Barracks, where she taught the Bannock Indian children. While she was there, President Hayes visited the barracks. Sarah pleaded with the President to have her people gathered at one place where they could live permanently, be cared for, and be instructed. Hayes replied that he could not make any promises. There was no change in the Paiutes' life.[16] In 1881, Sarah married Lieutenant Lewis H. Hopkins, who had courted her earlier.[17]

In the spring of 1883 Sarah and her husband arrived in Boston. General Howard was one of the persons who recommended Sarah to present the situation of the Paiutes. Sarah gave a lecture exclusively to women. Among the many sympathizers were Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (79 years old at the time) and Mary Peabody Mann. Their social circle included many prominent Bostonians. They took Sarah under their wing and worked hard to advance her cause. Elizabeth proposed that Sarah give a series of lectures to inform audiences of the history and culture of the Paiutes, and their present

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[15] Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes*, 217-223, 223-4 is Schurz's letter to Sarah.
[16] Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes*, 187-188.

circumstances.[18] Sarah decided to write *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims,* because she could only cover a few points in her lectures. She tells the story of her own life, in eight chapters. It has 268 pages and a 20-page appendix. The appendix includes the letters of recommendation and affirmation in defense of her character. It was printed in 1883 by subscription and it was sold for one dollar. Mary P. Mann edited the manuscript, wrote the preface and a closing note. The book is honest, free from willful misrepresentation, vivid, and full of naïve charm.

Sarah lectured in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. After the lectures she would sign copies of the book. Its sale helped defray Sarah's expenses of the tour.

Sarah collected thousands of signatures on a petition calling on the government to return to the Piutes some of their native lands, to make them U.S. citizens, and to allow them to govern themselves. Her petition to Congress was referred to the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, where Sarah spoke at length. Again she pleaded for a reservation at Fort McDermit and land given to each head of a family. She asked that the military rather than the Indian Bureau administer the annuities granted by Congress to the Piutes.

In 1884, Congress passed such a bill, not for Fort McDermit but for another piece of land, the Pyramid Lake

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[17] Canfield, *Sarah Winnemucca,* 192.

[18] Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes, editor's* Preface, and Elizabeth P. Peabody, *The Puites: Second Report of the Model School of Sarah Winnemucca* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1887), 4, 7.

reservation. However, Chinese fishermen dominated the fishing and there was no arable land left to be assigned to the Piutes. Sarah understood that all was lost.

The Peabody Indian School

Sarah was very proud of her self-education, her knowledge of several Indian languages as well as her fluency in Paiute, English and Spanish. She believed that education was the only way the Paiutes could advance and protect their rights in the white world, and to coexist with them.[19] Sarah believed that she could help her people only by teaching the children English and giving them a basic education.

Sarah wanted to create a school taught by and for Indians, where the children would not be separated from their Indian life and languages, as they were when attending the government schools, miles away from their homes. This was a first. Elizabeth Peabody supported the idea.[20] Sarah also wanted to help the children to be proud of the traditional attitude of concern and caring for one another and to respect the sacredness of life around them. Chapter 2 of *Life among the Piutes* describes their childrearing practices including moral development.

Leland Stanford, the California railroad builder, had given Sarah's brother, Natchez, 160 acres of land near Lovelock, Nevada,

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[19] Peabody, *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical, Solution,* 5.
[20] Peabody, *The Piutes: Second Report,* 3.

sometime in 1884.[21] Sarah began holding classes for Natchez' six children and some other Pauite children in the area.

Elizabeth and her friends sent canvas for tents, a wagon and draft horses, harness, agricultural tools, and money to pay for surveying and fencing a part of the land, seed, and some provisions to add to their pine nuts till something could be raised out of the ground. Elizabeth also sent money to start building the house. It would include the school and a room for a white teacher from the East. The building would also serve for cooking, eating, council rooms and a worship center. Sarah kept the receipts for the work done and the materials used and sent them to Elizabeth.[22]

Elizabeth was confident that Natchez' and Sarah's experiment would be successful, accomplishing in a small way what the government should have been doing on a large scale.

School description/teaching method

Sarah named the school the *Elizabeth Peabody School* in honor of her friend and staunch supporter. Elizabeth however, thought it gave the wrong impression as if it were she who originated the idea of the school and its prevailing influence. Elizabeth was aware that Sarah knew instinctively how to educate the Pauite children, and that self-development was the only real education for all children. This was the education advocated by Froebel[23] -founder of the kindergarten.

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[21] Ibid., 11-12.

[22] Peabody, *The Piutes: Second Report,* 13-14.

[23] Peabody, *Sarah Winnemucca's' Practical Solution,* 12.

In the summer of 1855, Sarah began her school in a brush arbor in Natchez' farm, two miles away from Lovelock. She taught 26 Paiute children many of who spoke no English. She started the students with a military drilling which they learned to respond to rhythmic directions. She taught them gospel hymns, which she interpreted into Paiute. Sarah was a resourceful and gifted teacher. To teach the children English, she will ask the children to say a Paiute word, which she repeated in English. Then she will write the word on the blackboard, show them to copy the English spelling in their books, and finally say the word aloud in English. By the end of the summer the children were writing English words on fences around the farm and told their meanings in Paiute to their proud parents.

As soon as the children could speak and understand some English she began teaching them to read and write it. She also taught them to draw and cipher. Sarah always reminded them of their Paiute history and heritage.[24]

Gratified with the first results of her teaching, Sarah sent examples of the children's work to Elizabeth and Mary Mann.

Each day after the academic subjects, Sarah taught the children to work on the ranch, planting, weeding sometimes digging, and keeping chickens and pigs. Sarah taught the girls to sew garments made from cloth sent by mail, four pounds at a time, by the Eastern friends; the boys, wanting to do all the girls did, learned to make shirts. Peabody called the school "a vanguard of the 'New

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[24] Peabody, *The Piutes: Second Report*, 12-13; and idem, *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical Solution*, 8-9.

Education' in which doing leads to thinking, and gives definite meaning to every word used."[25]

Sarah's objective was to make her students teachers, to use the older ones as assistants and substitutes, and to encourage the students to undertake their own self-education as she had done.[26]

Although the children were progressing well, there were still many problems to overcome. Elizabeth had exhausted her sources of money. The water problem on Natchez 's arid farm had not been solved. Miss Alice Chapin, the experienced kindergarten teacher who they had hoped would come to Nevada in the spring declined the invitation. The house had not been finished.

The school and the farm interested many citizens in Nevada and on the East Coast because it was an Indian-initiated project. Several of those who visited the school sent letters to Elizabeth with their impressions. In February 1886, Elizabeth received a letter signed by a group of 10 prominent citizens from Lovelock. They were very impressed with Sarah's methods of teaching and the children's responses and discipline. They contrasted Sarah's school to the reservation farms and schools, and suggested "that any further assistance would be well deserved and profitably expended by Sarah." Elizabeth was delighted and sent it promptly to the *Boston Transcript.* [27] Sarah at this time was sick with rheumatism and shaken with recurrent fevers.

The house in the ranch was finished before Christmas. Sarah had a school building. However, she had no school furniture, or

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[25] Peabody, *Sarah Winnemucca's' Practical Solution,* 18.
[26] Peabody, *Piutes: The Second Report,* 15.

other conveniences that the government boarding schools in the area had. She had only benches without backs which the children used as tables when they wrote, drew, etc.[28]

Sarah was afraid that the children would go with their families to the mountains on their annual spring hunt for winter food and disrupt their studies. She wanted to keep them as boarders. Elizabeth raised $100 to keep the children as boarders during April and solicited promissory notes to be paid in May, June, July and August.[29]

The school continued to interest local whites, who visited it and commented on Sarah's work. A western journalist wrote that the Indian Department should found a school in Nevada and put Sarah as the head of it. She knows the Indian character and her example will be of great value in encouraging her students. When Indians have a white teacher naturally there is a gulf between them.[30]

Sarah' hopes for getting funds from the U.S. government never materialized. A Washington official arrived at the ranch in the summer of 1886. He told Sarah and Natchez they could not receive any aid from the Reserved Fund for Indian Education unless Sarah surrendered the directorship of the school and Natchez his land. Of course they refused.[31] Sarah continued to teach for three years more with remarkable success. She closed the school in 1888.

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[27] Peabody, *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical Solution,* 10-11.
[28] Ibid., 18.
[29] Peabody *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical Solution,* 14-15.
[30] Ibid., 22.
[31] Ibid.

Sarah, exhausted by her struggles, retired to her married sister's home in Monida, Montana, where she spent her last years in failing health, a victim of consumption. She died in 1891 at the age of forty-seven. Sarah's obituary appeared on the first page of *The New York Times,* on October 27, and read: PRINCESS WINNEMUCCA DEAD: THE MOST REMARKABLE WOMAN AMONG THE PIUTES OF NEVADA.[32]

[32] *New York Times,* October 27, 1891, p. 1, col. 4.

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